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ABSTRACT

In this age of accountability, accreditation commissions face criticism from higher education professions and the public. Although agencies have committed their energies to protect the general public from inferior educational institutions, they appear to be insensitive to the effects of changes in education. There is a need to rank schools of higher education; and, since institutional programs are reflected by the support of their academic libraries, the lack of uniformity in library evaluation theory and practice is a critical problem. Accrediting agencies must define acceptable levels of library services and resources to become more accountable to the public. Selected results of a survey of Southeastern Library Association members on library evaluation are mentioned. (Author/KP)

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THE IMPACT OF REGIONAL ACCREDITING AGENCIES UPON LIBRARIES IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Regional accrediting agencies have been exposed to mounting criticisms and as a consequence, they have been called to task in this new era of accountability. The accreditation commissions are facing criticisms from the professions in higher education as well as from various facets of the public sector. In the case of the latter, the agencies appear to be insensitive to the will of the general public, the very sector to which they have committed their energies to protect from inferior educational institutions. Also confronting the agencies is the problem of the lack of uniformity in library evaluation theories and library evaluators' practices.

Regional accrediting agencies must respond to their critics and become more accountable to the public they serve. If a more viable posture cannot be attained, the agencies will abdicate their responsibilities to an unpalatable control, the federal government.

Accrediting agencies have recently come under scrutiny concerning their objectives, procedures, and effectiveness of accreditation. There are several emperors in higher education who have no clothes and accreditation may be one of them. At the least, accreditation must stand for inspection to satisfy its critics. Very few people in higher education are neutral on the subject of accreditation[1] and the evidence suggests that accreditation is beset by numerous problems.[2]

Today, accreditation will stand for inspection. In my opinion, accrediting agencies face three critical areas significant to their viability, the third area being the most critical.

#1 The recent proliferation of criticisms from the professions in higher education;

#2 The agencies' insensitivity to the will of the general public; and

#3 The lack of uniformity in evaluation theories and evaluators' practices.

The first problem is the recent proliferation of criticisms of accrediting agencies from the professions. Such criticism comes from two sources. One is from a sector that is well-grounded in facts, knowledgeable of higher education, and sincerely interested in change.

The other sector offers very simplistic solutions to complex problems; surely serious criticism requires serious thought. The responses of the accrediting agencies to their critics have varied. Some have offered bristling defenses of their status quo; some have made genuine attempts at reform while others have merely initiated cosmetic change.[3]

Regardless of the accrediting agencies' responses to criticism, it is clearly evident that the winds of change are blowing. Unless the voluntary accrediting agencies adapt to the forces of social reality, they may be caught up in the vortex of that ubiquitous threat, governmental control. Most other countries in the world administer a governmental form of accreditation while the United States is unique in practicing voluntary accreditation.[4] American in concept, design, operation, and evolution, it possesses the strengths and weaknesses inherent in democractic institutions. The wheels of democractic institutions, it has been said, grind slowly and exceedingly fine. Which brings us to the second problem--the accrediting agencies' insensitivity to the will of the general public.

There is a public clamor for accountability in that former bastion on invincibility, higher education. No longer is the win-loss record of the football team a prime measure of the quality of the institution's academic program. Public mandates have caused changes in consumer protection, equal rights, government, and social attitudes--higher education will increasingly be impacted by this same energy.

Regional associations are engaged in processes that have substantial bearing on the public interest and therefore must consider the public will in the nature of the standards they develop as well as the manner in which these standards are to be applied. As enrollments dwindle and costs skyrocket, many institutions are searching for survival. The public's resistance to additional taxes for higher education will cause changes in educational priorities. Changes in accrediting standards lag behind changes in education; they must be concomitant. For example, we have seen accrediting agencies give their official blessing to proprietary schools only after court action.[5]

Ralph Nader, beginning with his book Unsafe at Any Speed, made consumerism a household word; consumerism has made accountability a current catchword; and accountability should be what accreditation is all about.[6] What happens if a potential student seeks the information to make an intelligent choice among many institutions? If he turns to an accrediting agency and requests a rating or ranking of several schools, he will find that none exists. The schools will either be accredited or unaccredited, yes or no, black or white--there is no degree of difference in the eyes of the accrediting association. But there are differences; we all know that. What is wrong with giving the consumer a break? There is a need for evaluators to be armed with differentiated standards and with instructions to apply them vigorously. Such will produce a grading or ranking of schools if you will. A task force chaired by Frank Newman of Stanford University

released a report, commonly referred to as the Newman Report, in 1971.[7] This report emphasizes protection of the consumer by supplying him with more information than is now disseminated. What is so unthinkable about full disclosure to consumers from the insititutions as well as from the accrediting agencies?

There is a college in suburban Chicago which has a unique approach to its potential customers. Applicants for admission to Barat College receive a document that may tell them more than they expected to hear. For example, it warns them that an exceptionally talented student musician or mathematician might be advised to look further for a college with top faculty, students, and facilities in those fields. It also offers an analysis of eighteen departments indicating among other data the priority the library gives to reference works for each department. For six of the departments, the publication states that the library acquires only the minimum numbers of books and periodicals required to support departmental courses. In addition, the prospectus includes interviews with the president and the librarian.[8]

This is an innovative approach to education consumerism. A potential student needs to know how his educational purchase is packaged and what its ingredients are. Without disclosure, students cannot inform themselves and neither can those who provide advice, such as high school counselors.[9]

A third problem confronting accrediting agencies is the lack of uniformity in evaluation theories and in evaluators' practices. Literature on institutional accreditation is sparse; literature on the specific subject of the library

portion of accreditation is even more sparse.[10] William K. Selden (former Executive Director of the National Commission of Accrediting) summed it up when he said, "Of the hundreds and hundreds of volumes written about higher education in the United States it is surprising to note that no more than passing reference, if any at all, is made to accreditation."[11]

Manning Pattillo (writing in the Journal of Higher Education) focuses upon the specific problem of library evaluation when he states that "The library is one of the most difficult phases of an institution's program to evaluate adequately."[12] He continues to say that in almost every other area of an institution's program the inspecting personnel have a good idea of what to look for and are able to draw conclusions. This is not to say that these evaluators have an easy task.[13]

Unfortunately, in the area of library evaluation there exists no corpus of knowledge that is applicable to the assessment of all the various libraries. Patillo contends that there are faults in all methods of determining the effectiveness of a college library, and beyond certain widely accepted tenets there is a paucity of constructive thought as to how to proceed in a specific situation.[14]

In view of the fact that no guidelines are available, library evaluators in the Southern Association were surveyed to determine their procedures and approaches to the evaluation task.[15] The results of the survey indicate that the majority of the evaluators are convinced that the self-

study is of vital importance to the library. A solid library self-study contributes greatly to the evaluators performing their necessary tasks in a relatively short time frame of two and a half days. Since the self-study is usually a labor of twelve months or more, involving individuals from several strata of the academic community, it is not likely that a two or three day evaluation can exceed the importance of the former.

In the Southern Association, the evaluator is more concerned with the educational effectiveness of the library than he is with the operational efficiency. In deciding whether a library is educationally effective, the evaluator attempts to determine the adequacy of the book collection. He does this primarily by interviewing library staff, faculty, and students to establish their success-failure or hit-miss ratio in locating the materials needed by them.

To the credit of the library evaluators in the Southern Association, 91% interview students during their two and a half days of evaluation. It is not known how extensive these interviews are, but the focusing of time and energy upon one of the most overlooked areas of accreditation, the student, will reap a wealth of information. Evaluators could gain valuable insight regarding the individual's assessment of how the library serves his needs.

A legitimate and fruitful query would concern the adequacy of library hours; how best to ascertain this than to ask students who use the library. Or, better yet perhaps, ask the non-user why he doesn't use the library.

Evaluators do not probe deeply into the bibliographic instruction offerings. What better way is there to utilize the restricted resources than by an aggressive library orientation program? Of course, such programs vary widely, from a walking, guided tour of the library to the formal classroom lecture for credit. Bibliographic instruction is still in its infancy, and this is a paradox since libraries are complex organizations utilizing modern technology and very sophisticated means of acquiring, storing, retrieving, and disseminating information. Acquainting students and faculty with the entire spectrum of print and nonprint materials is a continuing, perplexing, and difficult, but immensely rewarding task.[16]

The evaluators attempt to evaluate quantitatively, though prescribed quantitative standards do not exist. In their attempt to produce a meaningful evaluation, evaluators reach out for quantitative standards which are external to the regional associations, such as HEW, Clapp-Jordan, Washington State, or the California formulae. They are hoping to find boundaries that do not exist.

However, evaluators do not want to base their decisions wholly upon numbers, number of books in the library, number of circulations, number of seats, number of staff, or number of hours the library is open. They would prefer that their decisions be based on some index of quality; not just the number of books, but the quality and use of books; not just the number of staff members, but the

effectiveness with which they serve the informational needs of the students and faculty.

Almost all standards call for an adequate library. Since the library supports all of the institution's programs, it should reflect the strengths and weaknesses of such programs. Therefore, some relationship exists between a strong library and a strong institution. What knowledge of a library's operation would be of importance to an evaluator intent upon ascertaining the strength of the library? Would his knowledge of the statistics on collection size and number of circulations be of any significance? Probably not, since such statistics suffer from dubious authenticity; as these numbers are eschewed more and more by funding authorities, they should also pale in significance to an evaluator. Anyway, are one million volumes necessarily better than a half million?

They are not if we listen to Richard Trueswell and Daniel Gore, that maverick of librarianship. Gore and Trueswell have advocated disregarding numbers games and growth altogether, instead, moving to a library that remains constant in collection size.[17] A no-growth library, meshed finely with the curricula, and offering duplicate copies of the most heavily used materials--all of these would increase the number of hits by a patron from the average 40-50% level. A hit is the success in locating the desired information.

Once a collection attains a minimal number of volumes, the hit-miss ratio should be more impressive to an

evaluator than the number of titles in the collection, particularly in an economic climate of declining budgets and rising costs. We must exploit these resources as the influx of new resources decline.

There is no agreement whether standards should be clearly specific or flexibly general. There are no studies which have determined if volume count, square footage, stated ratios, and hours of service have any relevance to a quality education. The reporting of quantitative data should be accurate and uniform throughout a region, but it is not; therefore evaluators feel they are dealing with a loose, subjective judgment even when a number or percentage is specific. For example, a library may report its holdings of bound periodicals to be 75,000; this figure, although exact, is meaningless for comparative purposes unless the binding frequency is known.

On the other hand, how effective is the replacement of normative data with such ephemeral standards as these: "each library must have basic resources, such resources should be available in a well-equipped facility, a competent professional staff should be available, sufficient funds should be provided, a modern circulation system is important."[18]

Such words as "basic resources", "well-equipped facility", competent professional staff", "sufficient funds", "modern circulation system" are not defined. Without definitions, evaluators are left to their own devices in attempting to apply these standards.

Library services and resources are not beyond analysis and measurement, but accrediting agencies have not defined an acceptable level of services and resources. Admittedly, this task is difficult; a junior college and a university do not march to the same drummer. When there is no range of descriptors for more than 600 libraries, words like "adequate", "sufficient", and "competent" place all of them in lockstep. Surely some libraries are more adequate than others, and just as surely some are less adequate; it is important to a consumer to know which is which.

It is disturbing that associations seemingly encourage the interjection of what in fact must be subjective opinion. This means that schools are unevenly rated, depending on the background and experience of the various evaluators; some are more difficult to satisfy than others. Also, an evaluator will change his opinions and ratings from visit to visit, depending in part on the problems to which he may be most sensitive at a given moment in his home environment, or to new information which he has recently gained. Such an important segment of an academic organization as the library should not be subjected unduly to human capriciousness.

The quality of libraries ebbs and flows and these fluctuations center upon individuals and resources, with the individuals being the critical factor. Since libraries are only visited once every 10 years, the quality of the library has improved and declined several times. Therefore, the evaluator may enter the picture at the wrong moment of time.

About once every 10 years a library may move into high gear; salaries are studied and comparisons are made; consideration is given to increasing personnel; cosmetic changes are implemented; restroom walls are painted; carpeting and air conditioning are installed and the list could go on and on. In some cases the changes are implemented to impress the visiting committee, and in others the visit is used as leverage to pry funds from the governing bodies. This is not bad. What is bad is that it only happens to some colleges and universities five or six times in a lifetime.

CONCLUSION

Where are we and where are we going? Well, we are in the midst of three problems. (1) The criticisms from a dissatisfied public mandate changes. These are times of turmoil and change in postsecondary education. The effectiveness, objectives, and procedures of most institutions are being questioned; issues such as due process, the public interest, and accountability must be addressed and regional accrediting agencies are no exception. (2) The accrediting agencies' insensitivity to the general public, i.e. the consumer, will certainly compound problem number one. It will require increasing action to remove the complacent inattention. (3) The cause of the whole problem is the fluctuation and quality of the evaluation which is caused by the individual evaluator's inability to translate a nebulous, ill-defined standard into specific needs and recommendations. I call for more guidelines for evaluators from the regional associations.

If there are meaningful standards for intelligent evaluators to apply, the infusion of constructive advice and assistance will aid our institutions toward viable development. As long as there is widespread inconsistency in evaluation theories, terminology, and practices, the benefits of such evaluations can only be erratic. Continued insensitivity will result in the accrediting agencies following the evolutionary track of the dinosaur.

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